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Laying a finger, not a fist, on the finks

By Conrad Knickerbocker

P. S. WILKINSON. By C. D. B. Bryan. Harper & Row, 441 pp. $5.95.

In 1952, among farm boys in a bus en route to an Air Force recruiting center, I read *Man's Fate* in the hope that Malraux could give me enough swagger to face destiny with a cool existential shrug. Later, my soles roasting on the ashy surface of the Lackland Air Force Base parade field—which seemed composed of equal parts of volcanic dust and freshly fallen meteorites—I took melancholy solace in the idea that I was a Sartrean victim of history. I tried to resign three times from OCS in a dashing up-yours gesture, but the machinery refused to acknowledge such eccentricities and, before I knew it, I was giving a cynical air policeman the customary dollar new lieutenants pay for receiving their first salute.

Harvard had prepared me for the kind of life I would lead if I ever inherited 200,000 acres in 18th-century Wiltshire, but when the will was probated, instead I drew Korea and the Strategic Air Command. The fact is that I never did quite figure out what was going on. Neither has Courtlandt Dixon Barnes Bryan, whose first novel, *P. S. Wilkinson*, dealing as it does with experiences similar to mine, seems further evidence that the best response "our" generation can offer is one of amiable bewilderment.

If candor and earnestness are acceptable in place of insight, *P. S. Wilkinson* ranks high. Perhaps the whole idea of literary insight is old-hat now anyway, a vestigial notion handed down from an earlier time when human events seemed measurable and relevant. C. D. B. Bryan went to Yale during a decade when thousands of young men ached for the return of bittersweet sureties. The central event of the century for them (or us, I should say) took place when Scott and Zelda jumped into the Plaza fountain. Nostalgia was more than a style; it was necessary magic to ward off the spirits waiting to face us down.

The Fitzgeraldian response, whimsical or not, at least had dignity. Yearning to squander bravery on simple causes, we wanted a decent tragedy of our own, a Caporetto instead of Pork Chop Hill. We wanted to be smart good guys lined up against dumb bad ones. We looked for losses worth mourning. Instead, some of us listened to Chinese buglers and took correspondence courses in something called psychological warfare. The bombs we dropped seemed to make no difference. No one escaped from the POW camps, and finkery became the rage. America grew more and more lardy. Everyone seemed to squish when they talked. The officer corps of my Air Force was made up of failed used-car salesmen, excepting those frightening boy geniuses, the 35-year-old generals who patiently bided their megatons.

What a dreary way to come of age, and small wonder that Bryan has joined Charles Bracelen Flood, John Phillips, Douglas Fairbairn and others of similar breeding and experience as an advocate of nostalgic literary forms. The realistic novel may not be adequate to explain the past 15 years; it may not advance the cause of fiction, but it's damned good therapy. Having written *P. S. Wilkinson,* Bryan at least can have the *sensation* of discovering order and meaning in his life. As dressing for dinner in the tropics keeps up morale, the incantation of *This Side of Paradise* preserves the illusion that one's youth was worth enduring, even in a time and place like this.

Bryan hardly bothers to maintain distance between himself and his protagonist, Philip Sadler Wilkinson. Both graduated from Yale in 1958. Both served in Korea as lieutenants in army intelligence. The same family and prep school background signal that *P. S. Wilkinson* is to describe the sentimental education of C. D. B. Bryan.

From the moment Lieutenant Wilkinson gets drunk with his buddies and later lines up Major Lewis with a date in a Korean whorehouse, we know that whatever his shortcomings, he will always be engaging, the kind of nice guy one hates to see baffled. He's no fink; he has a mind of his own; at times he may even be a big mouth. Major Sturgess, the used-car salesman of this piece, wants to shave the heads of Korean prostitutes who wireclip their way into the compound. Wilkinson disobeys the order and saves the major from the embarrassment of an international incident, exhibiting the kind of courtly reflectiveness one associates with good background.

He remains suitably frustrated by the murky double dealings of the Korean demilitarized zone. Syngman Rhee's duplicity enrages him. He finds the situation "existential," and the alerts, which never go anywhere, smack to him of Kafka. Early, he shows a dangerous yearning for pat answers, and things get worse when he returns to the States. Hilary, his old love, is married to a business go-getter who wears the same shirt three days running. His friends make tedious marriages and become junior account executives. Wilkinson seeks